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ABSTRACT

Embarrassment is an aversive state which occurs when the public image a person is trying to maintain during an interaction is abruptly discredited. When people are embarrassed, they try to salvage the situation by offering positive information about themselves to restore their endangered identities. To examine responses to the threat of impending embarrassment, undergraduate students (N=40) randomly selected a list of either embarrassing or unembarrassing tasks, which they were to perform in front of a confederate observer. Before performing the tasks the students completed two questionnaires, one in which they described themselves to the observer by ratings on personality adjectives, and one which contained manipulation checks. Analyses of results and self-reports showed that students expected to feel embarrassed when performing the embarrassing tasks. The personality descriptions of themselves which they wrote in anticipation of being embarrassed contained unfavorable items (e.g., grouchy, unapproachable, defensive, selfish) rather than positive items. They presented a negative identity in anticipation of being unable to maintain a positive one. (WAS)

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REACTIONS TO THE THREAT OF EMBARRASSMENT

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Reactions to the Threat of Embarrassment

Embarrassment is that uncomfortable state of mortification, abashment, awkwardness, and chagrin that occurs when the public image that one is trying to maintain during an interaction is abruptly discredited. This may result from the emergence of information that the actor was trying to keep from her audience, or by the unexpected occurrence of some event from which it is hard to recover (cf. Goffman, 1956; Gross & Stone, 1964; Sattler, 1965), but somehow an actor has failed to successfully manage an identity that he has tried to establish.

Now, as you can see, I'm using an impression management perspective based on the idea that, whenever we engage in interaction with others, we attempt to present a consistent portrait of our abilities and attitudes that fits our particular goals. Embarrassment usually means that we've blown it--a public predicament has befallen us and disrupted our attempt to project a socially desirable image.

This isn't a happy state of affairs, and as you would expect, studies have shown that people try to avoid embarrassment, even at cost to themselves. Brown and Garland (1971; Brown, 1970; Garland & Brown, 1972) have demonstrated that subjects will forego tangible profits in order to escape interaction they find embarrassing. For instance, if subjects have done something silly or juvenile, they'll generally decline to describe it to an audience even when it means sacrificing payment they could have received for doing so. In another example, if subjects feel that they're poor singers they don't sing as long for an audience as they do when they feel they're more competent, even when they're getting paid for the amount they sing. In these studies,

avoiding minor embarrassment in front of a group of strangers apparently meant more to the subjects than cold, hard cash. Thus, it seems we'll try to avoid embarrassment whenever possible.

But what happens when the damage is done and subjects have become embarrassed? Two studies have shown that embarrassed subjects try to salvage the situation by offering positive information about themselves that can restore their endangered identities. For instance, Modigliani (1971) found that embarrassed subjects made more image-enhancing statements to an audience than did unembarrassed subjects. After a public failure, they minimized their failure, described other abilities, excused their performance, and derogated the task.

Another study by Apsler (1975) was particularly interesting. He confronted embarrassed subjects with a request for help from an experimental confederate; a key was that the confederate had either witnessed the subject's embarrassment or was (supposedly) completely unaware of it. Embarrassed subjects were more helpful than unembarrassed subjects, and, importantly, they helped more whether or not the recipient was aware of their prior predicament. They seemed to seek the image-enhancing experience of helping someone, anyone, whether the person had witnessed their embarrassment or not. I think these results are provocative because they suggest that embarrassment may transcend the particular situation in which it is created. It may create a general discomfort or concern for social identity that embarrassed individuals attempt to relieve, regardless of their present situation. If, for example, a newcomer joins a party just after we've suffered an embarrassing incident, our abashment probably does influence our interaction with the newcomer as well as with those who were already present.

So, that's what we knew when we approached our present study. Embarrassment is an aversive state and, when it occurs, people will try to repair the damage by being helpful, displaying compensating good points, and changing the subject. It occurred to us, though, that prior studies had only examined subjects' reactions to situations in which they had already done something potentially embarrassing. Indeed, what we've said about embarrassment suggests that it's something that influences behavior after a predicament has occurred. We wondered how people might respond to the threat of impending embarrassment, given certain knowledge that they will soon be embarrassed. We guessed, given the impact of embarrassment, that forewarned subjects would start taking corrective action before the event. Specifically, we expected that those anticipating embarrassment would act much like those who are already embarrassed, even though nothing had yet occurred to discredit them. We hypothesized that such subjects would describe themselves quite positively to their future audience, preemptively enhancing their images in an effort to soften the blow of the upcoming embarrassment. So, with predictions in hand, we set about to threaten people.

METHOD

We invited twenty male and twenty female intro psychology students to participate in a study of impression formation. When each of them arrived at the laboratory, he or she met a same-sex confederate and learned that one of them would perform several tasks while the other watched. After agreeing to this procedure, the subjects were always assigned by a rigged drawing to the "actor" role while the confederate became the observer. They then randomly drew a list of either embarrassing or unembarrassing tasks which they were to

perform. Subjects in the threat condition learned that they would shortly be asked to 1) sing the "Star Spangled Banner", 2) laugh for 30 seconds as if they had just heard a joke, 3) turn on a tape recorder and dance to the music for 60 seconds, and 4) imitate a five-year-old throwing a temper tantrum. Previous studies had indicated that these tasks were guaranteed to embarrass people (e.g., Apsler, 1975). By contrast, subjects in the no threat condition faced a series of more innocuous, mundane tasks like writing out the words to the "Star Spangled Banner" and listening to the music. Subjects were then left alone to collect their thoughts while the observer was installed in the next room. During this period they completed two questionnaires. The first, to be given to the observer, provided the subjects an opportunity to describe themselves to their audience, rating themselves on personality adjectives along 1 to 7 scale. The second questionnaire contained manipulation checks for the experimenter. Following the questionnaires, subjects were debriefed; they never did actually perform the tasks.

RESULTS

The results showed that the manipulation worked. When we asked subjects how they expected to feel when they performed the tasks, those facing embarrassing tasks reported anticipating more embarrassment, self-consciousness, fluster, and awkwardness--that from a multivariable analysis of variance in semantic differential self-ratings of those four adjectives ($p < .04$). In addition, other items on Likert scales showed again that subjects threatened with embarrassment expected to feel more embarrassed and to enjoy the tasks less than those not so threatened (p 's $< .05$). So we succeeded in creating in subjects the belief that the next few moments of their lives would be

relatively embarrassing.

How then did they react to this dilemma? We had expected that they would describe themselves more positively to their audience to compensate for the embarrassing spectacle to come. First, we factor analyzed the personality adjectives on which they had described themselves, and three meaningful factors emerged. The first was a socioemotional factor with high leadings from items like friendly, likeable, and pleasant. The second factor was a competency dimension stressing competence, intelligence, and self-confidence. Finally, the third seemed to be a social avoidance factor comprised of items like unapproachable, grouchy, and defensive. To our surprise, MANOVA's on the self-ratings showed that subjects threatened with embarrassment did not present themselves more positively to the observers. Instead, they used the social avoidance factor to report less favorable things about themselves, saying they were more unapproachable, unsympathetic, stubborn, harder to warm up to, grouchy, defensive, and selfish (p 's $< .05$). Far from trying to make the best of it, they apparently expected the worst.

DISCUSSION

It seems that it is no small matter to be threatened with embarrassment. We expected our subjects to try to make the best of an unfortunate situation, but they were relatively withdrawn and resigned to coming off poorly to the observer. Faced with a situation in which it was going to be difficult to manage a positive identity, these subjects set their expectations lower, presenting an identity - in advance - that was altogether less convivial.

This raises an interesting conceptual question: What do we say these people were feeling? Nothing had actually happened to make them look bad, so

one could argue that they're not technically embarrassed. Instead, their lack of enthusiasm about the interaction, their negative self-images sound much like what we mean by shyness; to the extent that their impression management had not yet gone sour but they feared it would, one could say they were shy. So it appears that embarrassment blends into shyness when subjects are faced with the certain expectation of a predicament that has not yet occurred, and I think that there's a valuable lesson here. It's possible to integrate several topics like shyness, embarrassment, stage fright, dating anxiety, and speech anxiety under a common theoretical umbrella focusing on our concern for the evaluations of others. Each of them occurs when we're motivated to manage a particular impression for an audience but doubt our ability to do so (Schlenker & Leary, 1982). We may call this concern "embarrassment" after a predicament has occurred, and "shyness" before anything goes wrong, but in both cases we're dealing with the same psychological phenomenon.

For now, however, we can simply conclude that the maintenance of identity in social interaction is such a central concern, but such a precarious undertaking, that the prospect of embarrassment is far from being a hollow threat. Even the threat of embarrassment which has not yet occurred seems to have a considerable, negative impact on subjects' projections for upcoming interaction.

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